

Review of *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists* by Wazhmah Osman (University of Illinois Press)

by Aparna Shastri | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

ABSTRACT This review examines Wazhmah Osman's book *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars*, an ethnographic study of television media in Afghanistan. The book explores the Afghan mediascape through richly detailed interviews with media industry professionals and local Afghans, which provide a realist portrayal of the perils and triumphs of media houses in Afghanistan, local cultural contestations, changing gender norms, and the role and reception of television in the nation's rather tumultuous political and cultural life. Osman deflates the dominant notion in Western discourses of Afghanistan as a "hopeless landscape of powerless people," (2) arguing that there is a thriving, internationally backed media infrastructure and a hopeful, culturally conscious citizenry in the nation. She argues that despite Afghanistan's history of violence, ethnic tensions, atrocities against women, and imperialistic agendas by foreign powers, the Afghan media sector is a widely accessible platform for retribution against years of underdevelopment and war, with "the potential to underwrite democracy, national integration, and peace" (3).

KEYWORDS media, imperial, representation, gender, war, ethnography, television, Afghanistan

Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists. By Wazhmah Osman. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020, 288 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-0-2520-8545-1. US List: \$28.00.

In *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists*, academic and filmmaker Wazhmah Osman examines the changing mediascape of Afghanistan with keen, detailed, and compelling insights. Based on over a hundred interviews with media stakeholders, industry specialists, scholars, and "a cross section of Afghans ranging from those living in slums to presidential candidates and religious leaders," (20) the goal of the book is to "redirect global dialogue about Afghanistan to local Afghans

themselves" (2). Using extensive ethnographic studies of Afghan television media centers, conducted from 2008 to 2014, while closely examining the influx of internationally supported media infrastructures, the historical context of television in Afghanistan, and the deep-rooted cultural and political conflicts of the nation, Osman has effectively accomplished what turns out to be "the first in-depth ethnography of the Afghan mediascape" (18).

Divided into six chapters all centering on different aspects of the television industry in Afghanistan, the book is an all-encompassing, deeply-researched endeavor with strikingly bold commentary on the ways in which attempts by Afghan leaders to establish a modern and progressive Afghanistan were trampled by decades of war and terrorism, leading to the downfall and destabilization of a nation with immense developmental possibilities. As argued in the book, at the center of the chaos is television. The incessant discord between the functionality of television in the Afghan society, televisual representations of women, and an extremist interpretation of Islam by the religious Right has thwarted development endeavors in the region and "instigated a series of escalating battles among Islamists, moderates, and others" (3). It is interesting to note that Osman's investigation of Afghanistan's rising televisual mediascape was born out of a research interest in women's rights and local cultural contestations, thus providing readers an idea of how definitive the struggle for women's rights has been in the country and how television as a stimulating visual technological tool has played a role in the evolution of sociocultural gender norms.

The first chapter, "Legitimizing Modernity: Indigenous Modernities, Foreign Incursions, and Their Backlashes," describes modernization attempts by local people and governments in Afghanistan while also addressing fundamental questions about the very idea of modernity and the assumption of western modernity as a definitive litmus test for progress. To contextualize the motives of foreign powers in Afghanistan, which included "aggrandizing their own geopolitical and economic interests" (51) starting from the British Raj to the Soviet occupation, to interferences of the United States, Osman theorizes two kinds of gazes—the "imperial" and the "developmental." A recurring theme in the following chapters, the two gazes have varying degrees of similarities and differences and serve as a framework in analyzing the motivations of foreign powers that have made their way into Afghanistan. This chapter provides important historical contextualization for the ensuing discussions on developmental hurdles in Afghanistan, specifically in the media sector. It provides detailed accounts of development agendas that aimed to improve women's lives and provide a safe and wholesome education to all children, along with an analysis of imperialistic agendas disguised as modernizing missions by foreign powers.

Chapter Two, "Imperialism, Globalization, and Development: Overlaps and Disjunctures," continues exploring several developmental projects in Afghanistan on a case-by-case

basis. Osman distinguishes between positive-intentioned development projects as being ground up, collaborative, financially equitable in nature, and characterizes imperialistic projects as “top-down, shortsighted, and duplicitous” (79). She addresses the following question: “How are Afghanistan’s specific geographic location at the border of Central and South Asia, and distinctive sociocultural position, dominated by Indian, Iranian, Turkish, and Western media products and at the margins of Arab and Russian influence, shaping or impeding its development?” (56). By tracing the evolving meaning of the term “globalization” and drawing from Arjun Appadurai, Partha Chatterjee, and Herbert Schiller, among many others, she emphasizes the “limitations of working within ‘global’ institutional bodies that are not equitably global” (61). She points out that the assertion of US hegemony by imperialistic tactics like funding of media infrastructures and jurisdiction over Afghan airspace has been prevalent in over two decades of war in the region, the outcome being the death of thousands, and developmental stagnancy.

In Chapter Two, Osman also elaborates on four prominent schools of thought within global media studies- cultural imperialism, development communication, globalization theories, and hybridity. Discussing the former two in context of her project, she states that while cultural imperialism and development communication are often considered oppositional theories, her goal in this book is to “bridge these schools of thought so that one’s claims do not always negate the other’s but can exist simultaneously” (60).

In Chapter Three, “Afghan Television Production: A Distinctive Political Economy,” Osman provides a detailed analysis of the television outlets in Afghanistan—their affiliations, ideologies, functionalities, and strategies. Drawing from multiple interviews with television station managers and owners, Osman categorizes Afghan television stations into three groups: national, sectarian, and niche. While niche television stations seek to preserve the quintessential traditions, songs, languages etc. of their own ethnic groups and also serve a national purpose by preserving the cultural diversity of Afghanistan, it may enter the “dangerous terrain of sectarianism by catalyzing deep-seated ethnic tensions and violence” (95). Therefore, Osman asserts that sectarian television does not contend with the vision of an inclusive, multiethnic Afghanistan and “cannot be categorized as nationally minded” (95). This chapter also extensively examines content creation processes and content variety within the Afghan television industry, be it avidly viewed reality TV shows; or popular Afghan, Indian, and Turkish dramatic serials; or political satire and youth-oriented programming.

The fourth chapter, “Producers and Production: The Development Gaze and the Imperial Gaze,” explores the contrasts between the concept of television in Western and non-Western nations by tracing relevant scholarship in television studies. From incidents of protests and violence on the streets, to the historical marginalization faced by ethnic

minorities , to the unwavering anti-war and pro-justice ideologies of media makers, Osman elaborates on the impact of television content on the day-to-day lives of Afghans. For instance, Osman examines the animated series *Yassin and Kaka Raouf*, a story that follows the journey of two war-orphans who are adopted by their law-abiding uncle, Raouf, in a newly developing Afghanistan. This is one of the many examples discussed in the chapter which illustrate how Afghan TV content portrays the brutalities of life, on the one hand, and human rights, democracy, and justice, on the other.

Chapter Five, "Reaching Vulnerable and Dangerous Populations: Women and the Pashtuns," provides a comprehensive look at the media depictions of two targets of the international as well as internal Afghan development gaze—women, in need of "saving" or "uplift," and ethnic Pashtuns. The Pashtuns have been historically seen as a volatile group, and owing to colonial and Orientalist accounts, they've been "both valorized for their bravery and heroics and also stigmatized as warlike and militant" (141). Thus, they've increasingly been seen as susceptible to joining insurgent groups like the Taliban, and have consequently become the focus of the "colonial gaze and civilizing missions" (141). Osman also establishes how Afghan media producers are actively pursuing issues of women's rights and ethnic inclusivity through both their content as well as production practices by discussing issues pertaining to culturally sensitive television content, incidents of gender-based violence and honor killing, and the misogynist extremism of the Taliban.

In Chapter Six, "Reception and Audiences: The Demands and Desires of Afghan People," Osman delves into reception and audience studies and finds that Afghan audiences—who are slowly reviving from the struggles of four war-torn decades—expect television to serve as a means of justice and retribution from their long-drawn struggles of war and gender violence. The popularity of Indian, Iranian, and Turkish dramatic serials is attributed to an escape that these shows provide from the real struggles of Afghan women often portrayed in Afghan content. It is also noted that Afghan audiences appreciate content that retains its "Afghan-ness" or specific cultural codes, and "an Afghan universe of references" (196) without judging it on its production quality.

Celebrating the media sector as the antidote to corruption, warlords, and foreign interests, Osman affirms the positive role that it is now playing in the escalation of social justice and collective public awareness. By unveiling the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of Afghanistan and its complicated relationship with the television medium, Osman carefully establishes the historical, current, and imminent significance of television in the Afghan sociocultural framework. She underscores how the "Afghan media is challenging oppressive forces and institutions by making them accountable to the tribunal of the people" (215). Animated by Osman's personal insights, this in-depth media ethnography offers both a macroscopic glance at the play of global forces, along with microscopic

perspectives of crucial local ingredients of the Afghan mediascape, thus providing readers a holistic account of Afghanistan's national and cultural history at large. The book is an immensely insightful and exemplary contribution to media studies of the Global South.

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Aparna Shastri, "Review of *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists* by Wazmah Osman (University of Illinois Press)," *Lateral* 11.1 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.1.7>

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ISSN 2469-4053